

NORTHERN VIRGINIA TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY**MEMORANDUM**

FOR: Chair Phyllis J. Randall and Members,
Northern Virginia Transportation Authority

FROM: Harun Rashid, Transportation Planner

DATE: June 2, 2022

SUBJECT: Travel Trends Update

- 1. Purpose:** To inform the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority (NVTA) on recent travel trends since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background: NVTA staff is monitoring travel trends in Northern Virginia, comparing highway and transit travel metrics from 2020, 2021, and 2022 with corresponding weeks and months in 2019. NVTA staff has so far presented five of these snapshot analyses, at the 2021 June, July, September, and November meetings, and at the March 2022 Authority meeting.

This update features findings from a recently-released report titled “Traffic Safety Facts” (<https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813298>), from the United States Department of Transportation-National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (USDOT-NHTSA), in addition to analyses of Northern Virginia highway travels (afternoon peak periods) and transit ridership (average monthly). In our last update at the March 10, 2022, Authority meeting, we presented data analysis through December 2021. This report updates the analysis through March 2022.

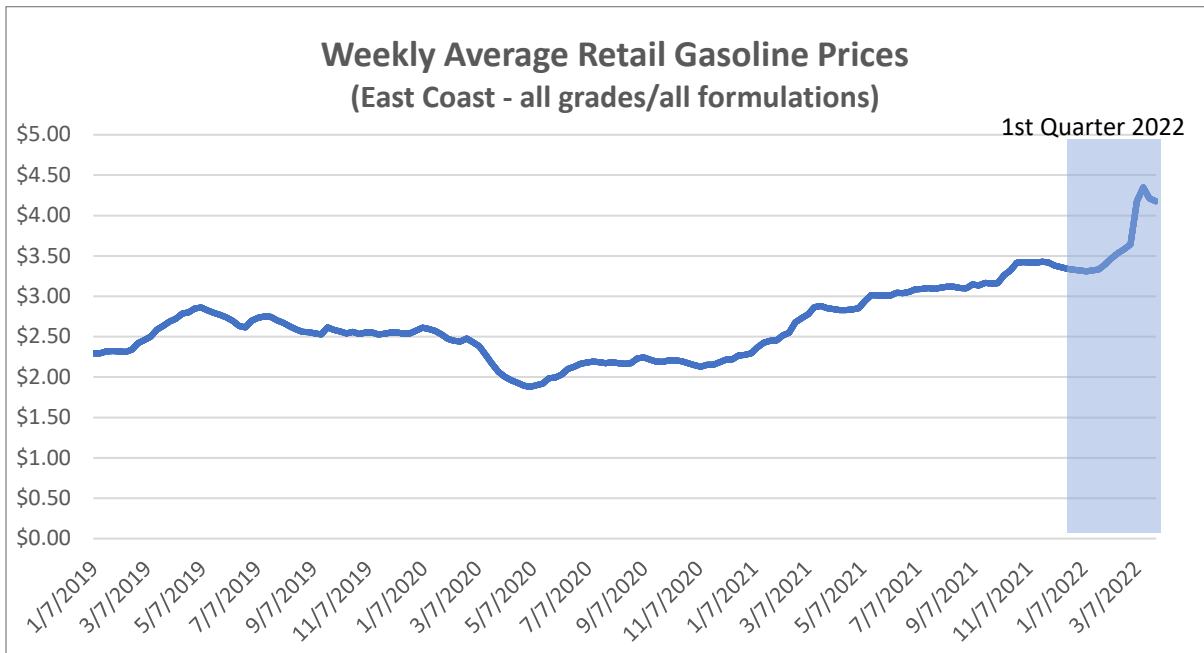
The objective of these analyses is to gain a better understanding of such trends, and to identify whether they are temporary or may be more permanent. This knowledge will enhance NVTA’s ongoing long-range transportation planning efforts and may influence project-funding recommendations in future Six Year Program update cycles.

- 2. Traffic Safety Facts (USDOT-NHTSA):**

Up until December 2021, we have constantly reported higher travel speeds on Northern Virginia highways. The NHTSA report states that during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide speeding related fatalities greatly increased from 2019 to 2020 (17%). This year the data shows that speeding-related fatalities still increased (up 5%) from 2020 to 2021. Therefore, the estimated fatalities in speeding related crashes in 2021 were still higher as compared to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019. NVTA staff is checking with the Virginia Department of Transportation’s (VDOT) Traffic Engineering Division (Highway Safety Section), to obtain comparable datasets for Northern Virginia.

3. Northern Virginia Highway Travel Trends:

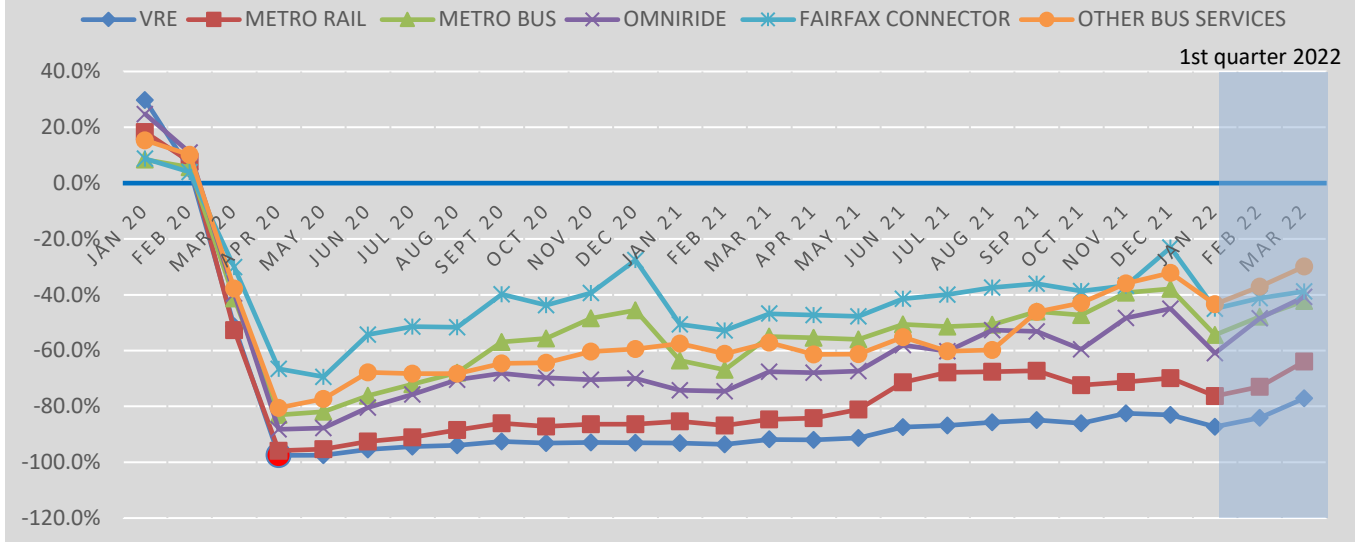
In the January – March 2022 period, using VDOT data, traffic volumes on freeways and major arterials in Northern Virginia were on average 10% below pre-pandemic conditions, and travel speeds were about 9% faster than pre-pandemic conditions. In our last update, we reported highway volumes/speeds to be closer to pre-pandemic travels (4% and 6%, respectively). A renewed decline in highway travel may be correlated to increasing gasoline prices in the same period (see chart below, data source – U.S. Energy Information Administration: <https://www.eia.gov/petroleum/>).



4. Transit ridership in Northern Virginia:

From a low point in December 2021, ridership from all transit service providers in Northern Virginia are showing upward trends (see chart below). In March 2022, among 'Other Bus Services', DASH ridership was almost at the pre-pandemic level (within 95%). This trend may be related to recently introduced or announced free or reduced-fare programs, and enhanced services.

CHANGE IN TRANSIT RIDERSHIP (MONTHLY AVERAGE)



5. Next steps: NVRTA staff will continue this trend analysis to track emerging travel patterns, as the region continues to adjust to post pandemic operations. In particular, we will be monitoring whether trends in gasoline prices have an impact on transit ridership.